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AUTHOR Freeman, Ruth H.
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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest advantages of teaching first graders to read and write using a whole literacy approach is the flexibility the method provides for meeting the needs of each individual learner. Children use their dictated language as the text and work within small groups. Children can join any group working at an appropriate level or work individually. Several aspects of this flexible, open-ended program contribute to meeting individual needs for progress: (1) children learn to become readers and writers at the same time; (2) children enjoy the mutual support of the peer group; (3) progress is commensurate with development and motivation because of the opportunities for repetition, time on task, and direct instruction; and (4) the management aspect of the program is composed of meaningful reading and writing activities. (RS)

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BECOMING LITERATE IN GRADE ONE

Ruth H. Freeman
School District of the City of Royal Oak
Royal Oak, Michigan

Reading Department, Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

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Ruth H. Freeman
4137 Colonial Drive
Royal Oak, MI 48072
(313) 549-3494

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BECOMING LITERATE IN GRADE ONE

One of the greatest advantages of teaching first graders to read and write using a whole literacy approach is the flexibility the method provides for meeting the needs of each individual learner. The rewards include the satisfaction each child feels with his/her progress, the pleasure we all derive from the process, and the love of literacy that develops.

After using a whole literacy program with small groups of children who were advanced or at risk in my role as a reading support teacher at the elementary level, I was given the opportunity to implement this approach as the teacher of first grade classes in the school years 1983, 1984, and 1988. The success is gratifying (Freeman and Freeman, 1987).

We begin by using the children's dictated language, which reflects their cognitive development, as the text (Carroll, 1965; Stauffer, 1970; Goodman, 1972). There is little problem with comprehension because the stories, three to five sentences on a single topic, are expressions of their own experiences. The children are grouped randomly into four or five groups of five or six children on the second day of school. Individual readiness for reading becomes readily apparent leading to re-grouping on the basis of potential.

Throughout the year, groups can be reorganized on a daily basis, if necessary, to keep pace with individual progress. It is not unusual to have as many as six groups, and I never have less than four. Ideally, it is best to work with five or six children at one time, but I usually have up to eight or nine in some groups, due to class size. It is easy to restructure the groups

because new text is dictated by the children every few days. Units of study in science and social studies which incorporate frequent field trips augment the children's background knowledge and provide a common cognitive base for the dictation.

The stories also provide the text for teaching handwriting. The children's writing of the sentences as they are learning to read them is reinforcing. This strategy supports my philosophy that teaching in context is most effective.

When the children's performance indicates that dictated group stories are not sufficient material for continued progress, printed text is introduced. Multiple copies of simple, meaningful stories are used in which repetition is at the sentence level or in the repetitive pattern, not at the word level. Trade books are chosen based on the children's prior knowledge of themes and topics so that comprehension is not a problem when reading books.

Most importantly, opportunities for placing children in situations where each will be successful are assured. If a text is too difficult, another is readily substituted. There is no prescribed order of presentation. If a child needs more time he/she can work with a group of children who are developing more slowly. If a child needs a greater challenge to continue to develop at a rate that is stimulating, challenging, and provides feelings of success and achievement, he/she can join a group working at the appropriate level or work individually. There is no feeling that a child must complete all

of the work done by children in a more advanced group. If a child can be successful at a more advanced level, he/she is welcome to work at that level.

A few examples of this flexibility are provided from this year's class:

1) K. began reading with the second group (one being the most advanced; six being the least advanced). When she demonstrated that she could progress more quickly, about mid-October, she was placed in the first group. She has maintained a highly competitive profile and reads at a 2.5 level at the end of first grade.

2) Two boys, R. and E., who entered the class reading at a primer level advanced more quickly than the other children who were not yet reading. They moved more quickly and easily through the text material presented in the first four months of school. They were instructed outside the group framework for approximately two months while the other members of the first group continued to gain fluency and the ability to respond to questions and map story structure. When the first group reached a comparable level, the two more advanced readers returned to the group because the range of challenge was appropriate, and because they needed the stimulation and the quality of discussion of the larger group. The children in the first group read at a 2.5 - 3.0 level at year's end.

3) T. and G. showed no ability to read their stories, recognize known words in new contexts or remember letter sounds for use in invented spelling

well into February. However, the children continued to try to express themselves in writing with help from the teacher and from peers. In addition, they continued to try to master the beginning texts as well as the group stories. T. began to grasp the utility of letter sounds for both reading and writing in March. She became motivated when her parents became concerned about her grade placement for the following year. At year's end, she is still reading at a primer level, but she is using self-help strategies rather than peer support to solve her problems, and she is writing with invented spelling so that it is decipherable to both teacher and parents. I see the supportive nature of the writing in T.'s developing word recognition ability. On the other hand, G. is using his ability to reconstruct the story to recognize words and read at the primer level. He has not yet been able to remember the shapes and sounds of the letters, despite consistent instruction in the context of their use. He uses random letter strings in his writing. His emerging reading ability, based primarily on reconstructive memory, is shaky.

4) Two boys, C. and D., who did not begin to read at all independently until January, advanced from the lowest group to the second most advanced group within four months. In another program they might still be working at the primer level because their initial progress was so slow. However, in a situation where each child is challenged at his/her own optimal level and opportunities for daily growth abound, no one feels confined or restricted by text or placement. C. and D. finished first grade reading at a 2.3 level.

5) M. considered himself a failure when he entered first grade in the public school because he had not learned to read in the kindergarten of the parochial school he had attended. Learning to read was a prerequisite for admission to first grade in that school. He was extremely resistive and defensive. It was December before he made small, grudging attempts to help himself. Limited success began to motivate M. and in February he moved from the fourth to the third group. He continued to be a difficult group member, but progressed to an approximate level of 1.7.

Several other aspects of this flexible, open-ended program contribute to meeting individual needs for progress. First, the children begin to write using invented spelling (Temple, Nathan and Burris, 1982) at the same time we begin to read dictated stories. First person narratives are written in journals on a daily basis; stories are written in shape books at the rate of one or two per week. Teaching letter-sounds in a meaningful, functional context, rather than as abstractions in isolation, makes fluent writers of my emergent readers. We know that simultaneous development of reading and writing is mutually supportive. As writers, my students become independent decoders using their knowledge of letter sounds; as readers of meaningful text and fine literature (rather than meaningless strings of words), my students become writers of stories patterned after those they have read and heard.

A second aspect of the program that helps provide for individual rates of progress is the mutual support of the peer group. Children are encouraged

to practice reading at three levels: independently, a child first reads his/her text silently; with a partner, each slower reader reads with a more advanced reader for extra reinforcement; as a team, each group reads together before they read with the teacher and they help each other solve their problems. When a group reads at the table, with the teacher, each child is expected to use independent decoding strategies and the peer group is taught to respect each child's efforts and not interrupt.

Thirdly, because of the opportunities for repetition, time on task, and direct instruction - each child reads independently, with a partner, with a team and with the teacher daily - progress is commensurate with development and motivation. More than 50 percent of each of the three classes read comfortably at a 2.5 level or beyond at the end of first grade. In each group there were children just beginning the reading process and others reading at an average end of the first year level. Each student felt good about himself/herself as a reader and writer; each student knew he/she was doing his/her best; each student knew he/she was successful.

Lastly, because the children have a wide range of literacy activities to choose from when the assigned work has been completed, and because no one is asked to work at a frustration level or complete meaningless rote assignments, the management aspect of this program is composed of meaningful reading and writing activities. Reading and writing occur constantly. Children are not reading silently at the reading table while others complete workbooks and

ditton. The children have never seen those things. Meaningful discussions of context, oral rereading for clarification, and sharing of written responses and stories are the activities of the reading table. Oral reading, a major activity of standard reading programs, decreases markedly as students become independent readers.

The teacher feels successful because each child is working to his/her potential. No one has been inhibited by artificial constraints on vocabulary or non-existent hierarchies of skills. Each child has made meaningful associations, integrated those aspects of the program that make sense to him/her and become as literate as individual differences permit. Each child loves to read.

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